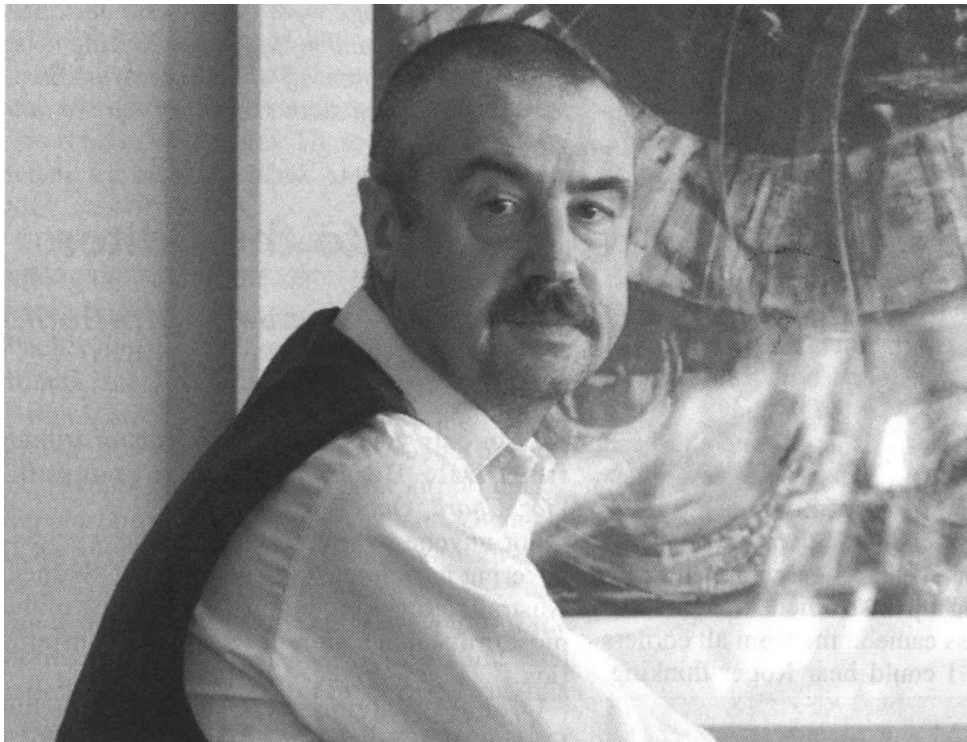


## ROGER FRAMPTON: AN IMPROMPTU APPRECIATION

by John Clare\*

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*[Editor's note: The Australian musician, composer and educator Roger Frampton died at 11.20 pm on Tuesday, January 4, 2000, at his home in Fairy Meadow, south of Sydney. Born on May 20, 1948, he was 51 years of age. Six months before, Roger was diagnosed with an inoperable malignant brain tumour, but continued to perform with Ten Part Invention (TPI), the Don Rader group, and the trio The Engine Room, while he was undergoing treatment. He performed at the 1999 Wangaratta Festival of Jazz & Blues with TPI, and along with Mike Nock and Tony Gould, was a judge for Wangaratta's National Jazz Awards, a piano competition in 1999. Roger's funeral took place at the Crematorium of Wollongong City Municipal Gardens on Friday, January 7, 2000. This tribute by John Clare appeared in the Feb/Mar, 2000 edition of JazzChord.]*



*Roger Frampton, pictured shortly before his death in January, 2000... PHOTO CREDIT GRAHAM HELY*

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When I look out from my desk towards Parramatta Road, on a sunny day, a white refrigerated transport will sometimes slide by and a brightness beyond daylight will reflect back through the camphor laurels along the embankment and into my room. There is no direct sun today, but an orange van catches my eye beneath the grey overcast sky. It says 'Gem Of The West' and it is indeed from Orange.

Playing in my room is Roger Frampton's *Two Pianos One Mind*, part of a trilogy he recorded for Tall Poppies ten years ago. This uses an unadulterated piano and a prepared one, angled so that Roger can sit with good access to both. The other discs are *Pure Piano* and *Totally Prepared*, titles which speak for themselves.

In this music are peeling melodies, reminding me of the carillon over there at Sydney University; there are passages where he improvises in the language of serial music and sustains it, and there are cracked chimes, and passages that are not melodies or reshuffled tone rows but simply processions of curious shapes, such as I can see passing along the great artery I am pleased to live by.

There is a wonderful tranquility in this music - as there sometimes is, believe it or not, in the flow of traffic outside, especially when everything is slowing to stop at the lights with air brakes squeeling and snorting like horses reined in - and it reminds me that we are artists and that when we sit down to work we are seeking shapes and rhythms that will give point to the endless procession of experiences. Few artists can take you so close to that very process. I can hear Roger thinking.



Frampton (left) pictured with John Pochée: "I'm not dead yet, so let's not have any doom and gloom"... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

As many readers will be aware, Roger Frampton had a brain tumour. The diagnosis came late, following a wrong diagnosis of stroke. When he told John Pochée the news, he immediately added, 'I'm not dead yet, so let's not have any doom and gloom.' He wanted to play.

Some readers will have been lucky enough to hear Roger playing recently, playing unforgettably with Steve Lacy, with Don Rader and with Ten Part Invention. It is most fortunate for us that the second night of the Lacy performances was recorded by the Sydney Improvised Music Association, and it is to be hoped that an ABC van recording of Ten Part will have yielded results.



*Ten Part Invention (L-R) Bob Bertles, John Pochée, Warwick Alder, Bernie McGann, Miroslav Bukovsky (in rear), Sandy Evans, Ken James, Roger Frampton, Steve Elphick. Seated in front, James Greening...*

Some people have only just begun to realise what a great, great band Ten Part is. Better late than never. Roger Frampton was one of its musical directors, the other being Miroslav Bukovsky; and these two are its main composers with Sandy Evans.

The rhythm section of Roger, Steve Elphick and John Pochée also played in its own right as The Engine Room. When they were the house rhythm section at Wangaratta for two years, accompanying all the contestants in the brass and saxophone competitions, Melbourne pianist and festival judge Tony Gould said that they performed this function as well as any trio he could imagine. In fact they were one of the best trios he had heard anywhere. That they were able to perform so well and create satisfying music with diverse contestants, all nervous, was due to the flexibility, open-mindedness and sheer tireless creativity of these musicians.



*The Engine Room, acknowledging applause at the 1996 Wangaratta Jazz Festival, L-R, Steve Elphick, John Pochée, Roger Frampton... PHOTO CREDIT BRENDON KELSON*

When Roger Frampton first began to seize my imagination, in the early 1970s, I would not have imagined that these would be the artists with whom he would form his most enduring creative association. I am sure that both Steve and John would readily agree that there are areas of music-making that they may never have entered without Roger's influence.

There have been other very important associations, however - with the American Howie Smith who was the first head of jazz at the Sydney Conservatorium, with drummer and percussionist Phil Treloar and bassist Jack Thorncraft. This group was the Jazz Co-op, which spearheaded the program of contemporary jazz that made

such an impact in the early years of The Basement. They exposed many listeners to a spectrum of compositional and improvisatory approaches, from complete freedom to beautifully coordinated play on tight structures. They showed what was possible in this field, and they held people's attention at all times.



*Jazz Co-Op at The Basement in the 70s, L-R, Phil Treloar, Jack Thorncraft, Howie Smith, Roger Frampton...PHOTO CREDIT HARVEY SHIELDS COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE*

Let us look for a moment at some of the things that fed into this music. In Bruce Johnson's *Oxford Companion To Australian Jazz*, Roger Frampton described himself as a comprehensivist - that is, a musician who can play with anybody. At the time of the Co-Op he had already played with a range of jazz musicians in England, including one of that country's most original voices, Joe Harriot.

At school in Portsmouth he had formed a quintet. His first instrument was tuba - then saxophone, then piano. In Adelaide and then Sydney in the 1960s he played with many of our most distinguished musicians at clubs such as the famous El Rocco. His first pianistic influence was Dave Brubeck. Keith Jarrett, Cecil Taylor, Bill Evans and Thelonious Monk all figured in his development.

But during all this activity he also studied classical music, experimental music in general, and various ethnic musics. In the early 1970s he began an association with the classical composer David Ahern, who by that time had formed an improvisation group called Teletopa. This ensemble, which was concerned with the musical flow of

apparently unmusical everyday sounds, toured the world and performed with Stockhausen.



*Teletopa in Japan in 1972, L-R, Peter Evans, Geoff Collins, David Ahern, Roger Frampton...*

John Cage was an influence, obviously, and Frampton has been one of the very few musicians who have viewed Cage's prepared piano pieces not as a mission accomplished, to be then left in the museum, but as an ongoing potentiality. At this time I also heard him in a performance at the Sydney Conservatorium of Steve Reich's *Pianophase*. Later improvising associates have included the great Keith Hounslow, Don Rader and even myself.

To hear Roger move - as he sometimes did with *The Engine Room* or *Ten Part* - from extreme freedom, using any sound source at hand, to beautiful flowing pianism, or perhaps more often the reverse, could be quite awe-inspiring. Let me stress that these profoundly comprehensive improvisations almost invariably amused, excited and entertained an audience. Often they had the audience in convulsions as well, because Roger was one of the great musical humorists.

Roger was from a very middle-class English background, at least as he described it to me, and it is obvious that without England's singular set of conventions there would have been no Goons, no Monty Python - just as there would be no Fellini without the surreal traditions of Italy. Roger was part of that, without a doubt. And of course migration to Australia gave his humour and eccentricity another twist.

Before I write myself into a corner with no room to say this, let me declare that Roger Frampton has been one of the great Australian creative artists, and one of the major influences on any creative activity of mine. But my talent is a pleasant minor one - I would be repelled by it if it were not - and some will rail against my critical enthusiasms.

In recent years we have heard major figures in the history of jazz – Lee Konitz and Steve Lacy for a start - singing Roger’s praises. Discussing Monk with composer and broadcaster Andrew Ford, Lacy immediately referred to Roger’s perfect understanding of the idiom, which allowed him to improvise on the classic Monk structures and sound both Monkish and Framptonesque at the same time.



*Major figures in the history of jazz Lee Konitz (left) and Steve Lacy (below) have been heard singing Roger’s praises...PHOTOGRAPHERS UNKNOWN*



When Lee Konitz was in Australia he always played with Roger, and the two corresponded regularly, writing and sending each other tapes and discs. Pause here in my improvisation. I have just had a listen to *And Zen Monk*, Roger's masterpiece from the first Ten Part Invention album. Fantastic solos by Bernie McGann, Bob Bertles, Warwick Alder and Roger himself, being Monkish and Rogerish at the same time. The arrangement is so zinging, clever, quirky and exhilarating.

Earlier today I listened to *Off The Beaten Track*, another Tall Poppies album - of duets with the very distinctive and perhaps not fully appreciated American trumpeter Don Rader. This is really nice stuff. It sounds better I think than when I first heard it.



At one time I was very lucky to do a series of improvisations with Roger, and it is the rehearsals that come back most vividly. They were improvisations too, in words and sounds, just the two of us and a tape recorder in Roger's music room. And the best one of all was when we forgot to turn the tape on.

With my eyes closed I could feel the breeze as Roger whipped about the room picking up instruments. Sounds of amazing vividness came at me from all corners of the dark, and I could hear Roger thinking, very very fast.

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**Postscript:** Since writing the above, Roger Frampton died peacefully in his sleep at home in Fairy Meadow, Wollongong on the evening of January 4, with his partner Sherylene beside him, along with his parents and many friends. John Pochée had





*Roger asked Tony Gorman (above left, pictured with Sandy Evans) to read some poetry that Roger had set to music as a young man. At this stage Roger could not open his eyes, but as Tony reached a certain line Roger smiled. Throughout the reading his fingers moved as if he was playing the piano...*

been with him the day before. John said that Roger knew that he was going and accepted it very well. That night, Sandy Evans, Tony Gorman and others had visited and Roger asked Tony to read some poetry that Roger had set to music as a young man. At this stage he could not open his eyes, but as Tony reached a certain line Roger smiled. Throughout the reading his fingers moved as if he was playing the piano. I should add here that a few weeks earlier, Roger had received his doctorate in music and performance from Wollongong University. John Pochée had been there, and also Phil Treloar, who had returned from Japan. At the end of the presentation all the professors on stage were in tears. So am I. Allow Roger, John and myself a little private joke. Roger Frampton went off with all the blythe saunter of a three-toed sloth creeping from the jungle.

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*John Clare's Roger Frampton obituary, published in the "Sydney Morning Herald" on January 6, 2000 can be read on this website at this link*  
<https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-34>